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ABSTRACT

Questionnaires were used to elicit and compare information about teacher strikes from superintendents and union presidents of 42 school districts within the state of Washington and superintendents and union presidents of 124 school districts throughout the United States. All of the districts had experienced teacher strikes within the previous 3 years. The summary, which gathered details about public attitudes, substitute teachers, classified employees, community groups, students, parents, and communication problems, indicated a need to re-evaluate the ways in which critical issues are decided within the school systems. Responses within Washington and throughout the country were largely similar. The public was usually unaware of summer negotiations with teachers, and shock was widely felt when strikes were announced. Substitute teachers who crossed picket lines were frequently the focus of harassment, in charge of more students than usual, and paid up to $200 a day. Parent-teacher associations and church and civic groups sometimes became involved in strike situations. Students were much more involved in Washington teacher strikes than was typical across the country; they spoke at meetings, joined picket lines, and passed out literature. Active communication with all involved groups is suggested as an effective way to avoid communication problems and facilitate negotiation. (CB)

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TEACHERS' STRIKE: A COMMUNITY EVENT

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SP 028 397

Running Head: TEACHERS' STRIKE

ABSTRACT

This article looks at the community groups which become involved in teachers' strikes and their influence at the local level. Questionnaires sent to 124 school districts nationwide are compared to questionnaires sent to 52 school districts within the state of Washington. All of the districts has experienced strikes and the responses were consistently similar. Results indicate a need for re-evaluating the way in which critical issues are decided within the nation's school districts.

TEACHERS' STRIKE: A COMMUNITY EVENT

Community involvement in teachers' strikes was examined in a study recently conducted by the Department of Education at Eastern Washington University. This study looked at exactly who became involved in teachers' strikes at the local level and was conducted in two parts. First, questionnaires were sent to the superintendents and union presidents of 42 school districts within the state of Washington, all of which had experienced strikes. These results were then compared to those collected during phase two of the study. Identical surveys were sent to the 124 school districts throughout the United States which had experienced strikes within the previous three years.

Fifty-seven percent (57%) of the Washington districts and forty-four percent (44%) nationwide answered the questionnaire with consistently similar responses. The questionnaire did not explore the actions taken by school boards, administrators and teachers, but focused on several secondary groups including substitute teachers, classified employees, community groups, students and parents. Their responses revealed some interesting patterns of information concerning community participants in teachers' strikes and the roles they played. Some implications of these findings are discussed in this article's summary.

RESULTS OF THE SURVEY

Ordinarily, the public was unaware of actions taken during summer negotiation sessions. Families were scattered about on vacations and details of meetings were usually kept confidential. As the attention of the community was drawn to the school district, details often became magnified and problems complicated. When the strike was formally announced, shock waves rippled through the community touching a variety of groups and individuals.

Substitutes

The number of substitute teachers hired to replace striking teachers depended on the size of the district and the number of teachers striking. The number of students per substitute teacher appeared to be a good indication of the stress level within the district. Most of the respondents reported a range of 40-60 students per substitute with extremes of 80-1 and 150-1. Substitute teachers who crossed picket lines became the focus of harassment both during and following the strike. Some districts reported paying up to $200 per day for substitutes.

Classified Employees

Certain groups of classified employees showed their support by joining teachers in their strike. Nearly 1 in every 7 of the districts surveyed from both populations reported classified support. Those employees mentioned most often were custodians, secretaries, food service workers and aides.

Community Groups

Parent-teacher associations, church and civic groups occasionally became involved in strike situations. Most often these groups consisted of individuals who used their affiliations as a platform from which to express their views.

Students

Since students were directly affected by these strikes, they often felt the need to get involved. Nationwide, 22% of the respondents reported student-initiated actions, but in Washington the percentages were much higher at 58%. Most frequently, students joined picket lines, spoke at school board meetings and wrote letters. Less often they passed out union literature, joined in marches, parades and rallies, blocked buses and even boycotted schools. Graduating seniors were particularly concerned since an extended school year might postpone graduation ceremonies and threaten their eligibility for scholarships.

Parents

According to the study results, parents had a greater tendency than did any other group to get involved. Parent initiated actions were cited in 48% of the nationwide strike surveys and 67% of the Washington surveys. Several respondents made reference to the aggressive attitude demonstrated by parents. They demanded settlement, applied pressure and sought legal action in the form of injunctions and restraining orders. Parents also volunteered to support strikers by painting signs, providing refreshments, writing letters and even marching in picket lines. Rather than choosing

sides, parents generally responded for the purpose of ending the strike.

These survey responses illustrated how easily a teachers' strike could become a community crisis. Teachers and school boards across the nation found themselves in the uneviable position of trying to reach an equitable agreement and to simultaneously reassure the public.

COMMUNICATION BREAKDOWN

The most frequently cited reasons for interrupted negotiations and resulting teachers' strikes were poor listening skills and limited flexibility by both parties. To understand how these problems develop, we must understand the dynamics of school board/community/school staff communications. Ideally school board decision-making is shared with both staff and community members through an active administration. However, there is a tendency for each party to leave the others to solve their own problems as long as everything runs smoothly. The public disappears from school board meetings after electing their best representatives. Teachers focus their energy within the classroom whenever possible. School board members tend to let sleeping dogs lie, believing that smooth operation should be appreciated, not disturbed. If this isolation continues, misunderstandings, disagreements and poor decision making are inevitable. Such a setting is fertile ground for labor disputes.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

The results of this survey indicate a need for re-evaluating the way in which critical issues are decided within our school systems. Across

the nation, school districts are recognizing the effectiveness of cooperative learning and group problem solving and are including both subjects in their curricula. As the survey results illustrate, these same skills are needed by professional educators, administrators, and community leaders.

Active communication is one key to gaining cooperation among all these groups, but active communication is more than advertising when and where public meetings are scheduled. School boards, parent groups, students and staff all have access to their own and each other's members through the media. All concerned groups should make use of newsletters, school bulletins, radio and television forums, student publications and local newspapers before a crisis has time to develop. Keeping each other informed of concerns, future plans, new ideas, accomplishments and needs is all part of active communication.

Opportunities for school board members, teachers and parents to work together are not built into our present system, but these are the very kinds of experiences needed to avoid conflict and foster cooperation. School districts can establish self-evaluation teams to conduct local studies and set appropriate goals. The Governor's 1981 Report on Education offered the following redefinition of educational leadership: "Effective leadership is not the sole responsibility of the principal. Leadership should result from organizing a school's staff and material resources in an open, interdependent working environment that values teachers as participants in decisions." This same openess can be extended to include community participants as well. Children's fairs which are designed to encourage adults to entertain and share with children through activity booths are especially positive opportunities for school boards and teachers to interact with other caregivers. Presently these groups seem to guard their power bases and

blame each other when conflicts arise. If we create forums for cooperative problem solving, we can better deal with conflict when it does develop. Board members who see themselves as community leaders coordinating the efforts of taxpayers, students and staff will be better able to create the cooperative environment necessary to quality education.